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ABSTRACT

The paper describes the On Campus Program at the University of Alberta, which serves 11 students with moderate to severe handicaps in a university setting. Students have Individual Integration Plans, which identify and organize a set of university-based activities appropriate to the needs, interests, and strengths of each student. Activities include classes, recreational activities, and social interactions. The program was developed based on 14 positive assumptions, including: generic setting, integrated activities, philosophy of life-long learning, enhanced self-esteem, wide variety of life-enriching experiences, improved employment possibilities, normative and challenging expectations, and opportunities for numerous associations and connections. (Author/DB)

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On Campus: Integrating the University Environment

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Abstract

This chapter describes the On Campus Program at the University of Alberta. This program serves 11 students with moderate to severe handicaps in a university setting. Students have Individual Integration Plans which identify and organize a set of university-based activities appropriate to the needs, interests, and strengths of each student. Activities include classes, recreational activities, and social interactions.

This chapter describes a daring innovation in providing a postsecondary education to people with mental handicaps through integration within a university context. On Campus represents the culmination of many years of effort by parents and advocates to open the doors to a brighter and more promising future. For many people, meaningful university education for persons with a mental handicap, regardless of the severity of the disability, is difficult to visualize or accept. However, the On Campus program at the University of Alberta demonstrates that individuals with moderate and even very severe handicaps can benefit from training in the university environment. Equally important, the program demonstrates that these individuals can make an important contribution to the university. To understand how On Campus came to be, the current status of the program, and the promises it holds, it is important to review the thinking which led to its development.

The Current Reality

The vast majority of students with severe handicaps finish school with few dreams and career aspirations. This reality applies regardless of the educational setting—a segregated school, segregated class, or partially integrated environment. There are a variety of reasons for this state of affairs. One of the reasons is the typical service model available to young adults with disabilities when they complete their schooling. This

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service model is largely composed of activity centers and workshops and is characterized by a number of elements which are problematic.

These services typically congregate large numbers of people with similar disabilities and diagnostic labels in segregated and artificial environments where they practice skills which may have little or no use in the real world of work. People are maintained in a perpetual state of poverty and preparation for something better that never comes. The longer the stay in these restrictive settings, the greater the negative effects on the individual. No one needs years of schooling to enter this service system. What the adult service system does, as it currently exists, is to negate the promise and purpose of school. The purpose of public education for all children is to prepare them for adult roles in our society. Where no appropriate role is available to students emerging from our schools, this purpose cannot be realized. Knowing the depressing outcome beforehand robs students, parents, and teachers of dreams and possibilities.

A number of significant effects take their toll. Personal self-esteem is necessary for success in life. The cumulative effects of the negative experiences previously described result in an inevitable lowering of self-esteem. This minimizes the potential for positive growth and development. Who we are as human beings is often derived from the experiences we have throughout life. These experiences constitute much of our memories and our knowledge. The limited life experiences so common to persons with a mental handicap constitute a threat to their human vitality. Worthy of final mention is the issue of friendship. We are only beginning to understand the value and importance of friendships. The stark reality for many people with mental handicaps is that valued friendships are few and far between. Friendships are difficult to achieve through segregation and limiting opportunities.

Lessons Learned

In attempting to address the issue of more appropriate adult education, it made sense to revise what we have learned from historical parallels. For example, the areas of community living and education have had similar histories. The parallels include a long and active struggle, progression from segregation to integration, from privilege to right, and from persons with a mild handicap to those with a severe disability. While the struggle still continues, a number of critical points have become clear.

These points include the necessity of avoiding artificial environments. These enviroments typically constitute segregated settings through which persons with handicaps are required to move with the rarely realized expectation that one day they will have made it to the real world. What we now know is that growth and change take place

within the individual as opposed to an artificial service continuum. Further, participation and presence in the valued world is a condition of support, preparation is not. The eternal training program that rarely or never culminates in more meaningful participation in our society is clearly an unacceptable solution. A related dilemma is reflected in our ability to correct our mistakes. Having created an unresponsive and debilitating service system, we now require tremendous energy and dedication to produce positive change.

We have learned that persons with a mental handicap have essentially the same needs as any other individual. The best way to meet those needs is through the same means as is used to meet all our needs. This necessitates supported integration within generic environments. This principle is illustrated by the following examples. Many adults have a need to continue their education through a variety of means, including university education. Another need is to have a wide variety of life-enriching experiences; for some people, university education provides some of these needed experiences. Everyone has the need for self-esteem; for some people, attendance at a university helps meet this need. Everyone has a need for a wide circle of friends who help to provide us with our self-identity, support us when the going gets tough, fulfill our need to be needed, share life with us, and care for us. A university is one place where the possibilities of forming life-long friendships exists.

Traditionally, new programs have engaged in a process termed streaming, based on the assumption that the program had to first demonstrate its viability. The most common results were that persons with a severe disability and perhaps the greater need were least likely to ever receive service. The principle employed by On Campus holds that, to be a viable educational program it must serve all persons with a continuing education need, irrespective of the severity of disability. With a focus on ability, disability is far less an issue.

Cautions

In an effort to address some of the problems noted earlier, a number of new initiatives have been developed. However, it is our opinion that these new approaches have seriously limiting factors. These factors need to be identified and considered in the light of preceding historical lessons.

1. *Specialized transitional services.* Due to the failure of special education to lead to successful community employment and integration, new service structures are being developed. Unfortunately, this fix results in the development of new services exclusively for persons with a disability. If the above principles were to be applied there would be a recognition that transition at various points in

time is an issue for all of us. In turn, the best way to facilitate transition is through the same means of support that most of us require. There are a variety of generic services and natural means by which most people successfully complete a transition in life. The development of separate and artificial services has not worked before; it is unlikely to work now.

2. *Work is all that matters philosophy*. There is an overly narrow view that the only option for adults leaving school is to work. This is certainly one possibility, but there is more to life than work alone. It is interesting that during the last several decades, the central role of work in the lives of people without disabilities has diminished. Working hours have become shorter and other life options more acceptable. For people with handicaps, however, work continues to be seen as the sole and total reason for being, even when their true economic contribution is small. Continuing education provides another viable alternative for many people in our society and should be available to adults with mental handicaps. After all, learning is a life-long occupation. In addition, there are many life experiences integral to our well-being. Postsecondary education is one means by which to address this consideration.

3. *Community intensive segregation*. This is another strategy to offset the failure of the traditional special education system. This approach promotes the training of students with a mental handicap in community environments outside of school. This means that students are taken out of the school environment to go shopping or to bus tables, usually at times when their nonhandicapped peers are in school. For some reason, special educators have failed to realize that schools are valued community environments and that the best preparation for integrated community living is integrated schooling. Perhaps the loss of social interaction opportunity that results from removing these students from the schools and their age peers goes unnoticed because the school program has failed to provide any meaningful integration. This should be rectified by better integration within school programs, however, not by further physical isolation that results from removing students from the schools.

There are many natural ways to support a developing career orientation for students with a mental handicap. There is a role for work experience and part-time employment, but on the same basis as these occur for nonhandicapped peers.

Post-Secondary Education

On the basis of this analysis, a group of parents and advocates have been working for a number of years to obtain integrated postsecondary educational opportunities within generic settings. Adults typically have a vast array of continuing educational options that are largely taken for granted. A quick glance at a college or university calendar or a continuing education supplement provides evidence of the variety available. In contrast with the options available to adults with mental handicaps, these options illustrate the broad spectrum of human developmental needs. The dream is to some day have the same vast array of choices available to all. The following list identifies the positive assumptions that underlie the necessity for the development of integrated postsecondary education choices:

1. Generic setting.
2. Broad based perspective of human needs.
3. Integrated activities.
4. Possibilities for multiplicity of relationships.
5. Philosophy of life-long learning.
6. Socially-valued continuing education.
7. Wide variety of life-enriching experiences.
8. Enhanced self-esteem.
9. Natural and functional environments used in integrated contexts at normative times.
10. Improved employment possibilities.
11. Normative and challenging expectations.
12. Wide range of options.
13. Opportunities for making a valued contribution.
14. Opportunities for numerous associations and connections.

These valued components, typically available in normative postsecondary settings, led to the development of On Campus.

Why a University?

A university setting was chosen for the following reasons:

1. *Social role valorization.* The role of a university student is highly valued in our culture. It provides for significant personal competence and social image enhancement.

2. *Change agentry.* A university holds such a valued and respected academic position in our society, it is virtually impossible for anyone to say that an On Campus student is not ready for valued community life. If a person with a severe disability can succeed at university, which doors in our society can remain closed?

3. *Possibilities.* A university is very much like a small, or in some instances, large community. It provides a vast array of resources, activities, associations, learning opportunities, and peers.

4. *Consistent with the role of a university.* Universities often provide many community support services in addition to traditional academic instruction.

On Campus

On Campus began with eight students in February 1987 at the University of Alberta. It is funded by Edmonton Regional Office of Alberta Social Services. It is operated under the auspices of the Gateway Association for the Mentally Handicapped and is affiliated with the Developmental Disabilities Center at the University. The students come from a variety of backgrounds. Some have been in segregated schools or classrooms with the label moderately to severely handicapped, while others have been institutionalized most of their life with little or no education and multiple disabilities. On Campus has a zero exclusion policy and deliberately opened its doors to include persons who have typically been excluded from community services.

On Campus has a number of major goals:

1. *Fostering and nurturing relationships.* On Campus places its highest priority on friendships. Friendships cannot be artificially created, but the opportunities for friendships can be built and supported. Eleven students in a community of over 20,000 peers provide the opportunities for all kinds of common interests and activities. The facilitation of natural support networks holds the promise for an interesting life after university hours.

2. *Participation in university life.* On Campus considers valued experiences to be a vital ingredient to personal growth and development, ranging from attending classes to hanging out, a particularly necessary university skill.

3. *Integration facilitation.* On Campus staff function as integration facilitators as well as providing needed instruction. Volunteers function as peer tutors in a variety of subject areas depending on student interests.

4. *Employment.* After four to six years of university education, students will be employed either on or off campus. The university and surrounding neighborhood contain many potential jobs, including part-time and summer jobs which contribute to references and a resume.

5. *Skill development.* Students will be assisted in the continued development of their personal competencies both on and off campus.

6. *Individualization.* There is no set curriculum. The curriculum is established for each individual student according to his or her needs.

7. *Evaluation.* On Campus has an external evaluation process as part of its operation.

Program Notes

The 11 individuals attending the University of Alberta recently graduated from either Edmonton Public or Edmonton Separate School at age twenty. Like many of their fellow graduates, they chose postsecondary education at the University of Alberta as their next life option to continue their education. Because the program does not require homogeneity of its students (rather it is designed for diversity), students do not come from a single diagnostic or categorical grouping. A wide range of handicapping conditions exist among these students; some would be considered severely disabled and unable to gain admission to many sheltered workshops or similar less integrated adult placements because they lack prerequisite self-care or communication skills.

The program goal is to provide high quality postsecondary education appropriate to the needs of each student in an image-enhancing environment. The students attend a wide variety of classes, take part in recreational activities, join University of Alberta clubs, and "just hang out" with fellow students. We see evidence of the development of long lasting relationships between On Campus students and others at the university. These relationships develop spontaneously and provide mutual benefit to all involved, not one-way benefits in return for pay.

Many other university students work with On Campus students in addition to paid program staff. Some teach (e.g., reading, computers, drama), others are involved in recreational programs or social activities. Some students at the university attend classes with On Campus students and facilitate their involvement in class activities. Through these contacts, On Campus students are meeting others and developing social networks.

Although On Campus is autonomously funded, the University of Alberta has cooperated in many ways. It is a large community with a

wealth of opportunities and facilities to develop students' interests and needs. Some skills taught to students will have specific vocational application in the future, but the primary goals of the program are related to social adjustment and skills. This reflects a recognition of research support for the importance of these skills in ultimate vocational adjustment as well as a philosophical commitment to meeting the needs of the whole person.

An Individual Integration Plan (IIP) process is used to determine aspirations, strengths, needs, and interests. This high degree of individualization makes description of the program difficult because the goals and activities vary greatly.

Parents, students, staff, and others involved share the students' perception that the program is meeting their needs. Although not all students in the On Campus program can express themselves, these comments from two help to communicate how they experience the program:

> I go to the University of Alberta campus and I used to go to another school. I like it at the U of A in comparison to the other school because the U of A is bigger and has lots of buildings. I meet lots of other people at the U of A and have coffee and lunch. I also work with a person in the weight room and stretch in the pavilion. In the locker room one time I met someone who has the same interests as I do—running. Recently I have lots of friends here who I have lunch with and go to classes with.

> I like the university because I do many things. I socialize with friends. I go to the library. I swim with a friend. I'm learning to read with a peer volunteer and I go to music class. I'm also learning things like money skills and banking. Most of all I want to make new friends.

Conclusion

This presentation describes the beginning of a new, integrated, postsecondary educational option at the university level. We have tried to present the thinking that led to the formulation of On Campus. After just a couple of months, this beginning has been very positive. Maybe some dreams do come true.